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Vietnam Anguish: Being Ordered to Lie

A Mississippi colonel explains how it feels to cover up, and to tell the truth

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By Gains B. Hawkins

A FAMOUS LADY columnist who writes for The Washington Post called the other day and asked if I had any regrets about participating in the making of CBS' controversial documentary on the mis- or uncounting of the enemy in Vietnam — the documentary that has led Gen. William C. Westmoreland to file a \$120-million libel suit against CBS. In a state of mild shock at being called by a famous lady newspaper columnist, I could only mumble something about "Yes" and "No."

With all my wits intact I could have answered a bit more eloquently, "Yes, there is some anxiety — a concern that I will appear to be a fink or a rascal, or a sensation monger or worse; and some private annoyance that life in relatively quiet retirement in this little community of West Point on the black prairie of northeast Mississippi will never be the same again.

But, no, too, Miss Mary (I should have said), there is a compulsion here, a tardy realization that the tale must come out no matter what the personal pain or annoyance. In truth, the retelling is somewhat like the war itself, Miss Mary. It hurts, and it is larger than all of us.

When the deception began is not clear in my memory. Years have passed and memory can be like the smoked glass through which one is warned to look at an eclipse. Even when the deception was going on there was a wish not to remember, as if the not remembering would somehow belie the happening itself. But it began to happen sometime during the last three or four months of my 18-month tour of duty that ended in the early part of September 1967.

The tour began in February 1966 as a reunion and a challenge. The reunion was with then-Brig. Gen. Joseph A. McChristian, the chief intelligence officer of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. I had served under the general before when he held a similar post at the Army's Pacific headquarters in Hawaii. There, under the tutelage of Gen. McChristian, this career Army intelligence officer had first discovered the intellectual challenge of an area of military intelligence work called "order of battle."

Order of battle intelligence, broadly speaking, is everything one must know about an enemy's military force. This knowledge comes from studying the units of that force; where exactly they are located; how many people are in them; what types and how much equipment and weaponry they possess; their organization or command structure; their supply system; their tactics; their state of training; their state of morale, or will to fight; their actual effectiveness in combat, and probably most important, the quality of their leadership, from commander-in-chief down to squad leaders. This is a slow, deliberate way to study a military force. It is also a technique we needed to use to try to understand the Vietnamese communists.

During the quarter century I spent wearing the Army uniform, intelligence was my principal endeavor. Drafted in early 1942 out of a tiny teachers college in the Mississippi Delta to serve in The Big War, I was later commissioned a second lieutenant and did my thing in Europe as a very junior intelligence officer (where I served briefly with then-Col. McChristian).

Discharged as a captain in the Army Reserve in 1946, I returned to Delta State Teachers College to complete my degree, taught high school English and somehow managed to earn a master's degree in English at Ole Miss just in time to be drafted again for service in Korea.

The Army was good to me. It paid me well and held out the promise of security in retirement at a fairly youthful age. It taught me Japanese, sent me to Asia, then launched me permanently in the area of intelligence by sending me to Stanford University to concentrate on the countries of the Far East.

I held no pretensions of finding a place on the Army's fast track to a general's stars. I was happy as a duck on a pond doing the academic work of an intelligence analyst, and I appreciated the pay, which was much better than that of Mississippi school teachers. I had found my home in the Army, and I was proud of my home.

Vietnam was the ultimate test for professional intelligence officers. There field commanders could not draw circles around hilltops or towns and make them military objectives simply because they were important pieces of real estate. In Vietnam the critical problem was not real estate, but finding and destroying the enemy's military force. Intelligence officers had to find the enemy before the enemy could be confronted and destroyed.

And so it was that in early 1966, bored with a job as an intelligence personnel officer at Ft. Holabird in Baltimore, I had sent a note to Gen. McChristian in Saigon offering my services. A few weeks later I was saluting him at his desk inside the MACV compound.

Considering our previous relationship in Hawaii, I was not surprised when the general told me I would oversee the production of order of battle intelligence. In his words, I was "Mister Order of Battle." This was the challenge.

The title was reiterated again and again during the months I served him. And I have always believed there was a special motive for these persistent reminders by the general to his staff, to visitors and to everyone else up and down the line.

There were almost as many vociferous estimates of the enemy force in Vietnam as there were interested parties. But Gen. McChristian wasn't interested in journalists' guesses or field commanders' "gut feelings." He demanded a plodding, painstaking analysis of the bits and pieces. This was to be my responsibility.

Keeping the books on the communist force was a complicated task because the force itself was Byzantine. There were the North Vietnamese Army units. There was the massive infiltration effort which provided additional regiments and individual

replacements for casualties in the regiments already in the South. There were the original Vietcong regiments and battalions formed in the South. There were myriad local units of squad, platoon and company size. There was a formidable array of variously named and loosely organized guerrilla types who we categorized as "irregulars." There were "administrative services" that included forces providing all kinds of support to communist troops.

There was also something we called the "political order of battle," the civilian bureaucracy or "infrastructure" which ran the communists' shadow government in the South.

And then there was the populace itself — those parts of the civilian population which the communist military forces controlled and which were required to aid every facet of the communist cause, from killing to spying to sharing food and shelter.

You must bear in mind, Miss Mary, that this thing was still being called a "guerrilla war" in the American news media. Many in the news media, in Washington and in the upper reaches of our own military doubted the accuracy of our MACV estimates of enemy strength as they grew higher and higher. The bottom line of enemy personnel strength had become an obsession among the watchers as well as the participants. The steady growth of that figure on the bottom line was the sustaining argument for expanding our own forces in South Vietnam.

Meanwhile, Gen. McChristian had been carefully picking and choosing from the lists of young intelligence officers and enlisted men arriving in South Vietnam. He assembled a combined intelligence center, along with our South Vietnamese Army counterparts, who knew their native language and customs in a way that school training cannot duplicate. These men had to sift through the bales of documents captured on the battlefield and taken from the enemy's military and civilian headquarters by U.S. and South Vietnamese troops.

By early spring in 1967, our team of analysts had constructed a graphic representation of the enemy's force structure. It showed the massiveness of North Vietnamese involvement and the extent of direct control from the North of military and political operations in South Vietnam.

I can remember the afternoon when we briefed Gen. McChristian

on our first big accomplishment — a huge chart depicting the communist force structure. There were solid lines for confirmed units dotted lines for suspected units and dashed lines for units which were still in the planning stages. It was the most beautiful picture I have ever seen.

I stood there leaning against the wall on the opposite side of the room listening as a young Army captain conducted the briefing, and I thought to myself, "Goddam, they've got that sonofabitch literally nailed to the wall." I was glad to have been a part of it.

This had taken care of the problem of clarifying the enemy's conventional force and command structure. We still had to deal with the irregulars and the political cadres.

Later in the spring of 1967 our order of battle analysts at MACV had finally reached their goal of sorting out these categories and updating the ancient strength estimates we had inherited from the South Vietnamese in 1965. Now, I was to present our findings to the MACV commander, Gen. Westmoreland. Our new figures considerably exceeded those in our published order of battle summary. The published order said the total enemy strength was just under 300,000; as best I can recall, our new estimate was roughly 500,000.

When I briefed Gen. Westmoreland on our new figures, he expressed surprise. He voiced concern about the major increase in the irregular forces and political cadres that we had found. He expressed concern about possible public reaction to the new figures — that they might lead people to think we had made no progress in the war. The general did not accept the new numbers.

I then reduced them, quite arbitrarily, and returned to Gen. Westmoreland to brief him on my second, lower count. But he rejected it as well.

Gen. Westmoreland has since denied that he knew the enemy was stronger than he admitted in communications to Washington, saying the higher figures we had produced included political cadres that were essentially "noncombatants." But the higher figures we had produced reflected the extent of control that the enemy's conventional military forces exerted over both geography and population. In short, they indicated the enormity of the military problem that existed in South Vietnam.

If the irregular forces and political cadres were as numerous as we then believed them to be, we had a much bigger problem on our hands than we had realized: Victory against the communists was farther from our grasp than we had admitted, and by refusing to acknowledge the higher numbers, the command was refusing to come to grips with the true nature of the problem.

Gen. McChristian's tour of duty came to an end. A new intelligence staff took over. I had several more weeks to go before my tour would end as well. But just at this time, the Central Intelligence Agency, prodded by an astute and forceful analyst named Sam Adams, was increasing the pressure for higher strength estimates for the irregulars and politicals to be entered into an upcoming National Intelligence Estimate.

I had known Sam Adams throughout my tour in Vietnam. I admired his brilliance, and we developed a friendship which would ebb and flow throughout the subsequent months as we became professional adversaries. Sam had been insisting since mid-1966 on much higher estimates of the irregular forces, and I had resisted him.

Our differences were procedural. Gen. McChristian had originated a plan for slow and methodical study by MACV analysts at the village level where the irregulars operated — an approach which promised greater validity than figures produced by analysts in Saigon and Washington. Actually, the strength figures reflected in our first revised estimate (the first one Westmoreland rejected) were only a little lower than the figures Sam had proposed earlier.

I simply cannot recall when or under what circumstances a ceiling on enemy strength was imposed by the MACV command. In the hazy recesses of my memory it seems that this ceiling — a limit on our total enemy strength estimate — emerged subtly in pieces that eventually took shape as a whole.

It started, I think, with something we called "a spread." This is the artful process of juxtaposing a top figure that cannot be ignored with a bottom figure that is more desirable, then shrugging one's shoulders and saying, "It's somewhere there in between." From then on, things tended to go downhill.

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In the beginning — that is, when I was first realizing that the new strength figures would never be accepted — I simply felt resigned. I had been down that road before. I was not a virgin fearful of being raped in the dark cemetery alongside the road.

That's the way it is. As an intelligence analyst you give your superior the best answers you can find, and if he doesn't like your answers, he shows you your weaknesses, and you go back to work to eliminate them.

But there was a new problem here — even for a nonvirgin. The figures had not been criticized, so far as I knew, for weakness of analytical effort, but for the potential impact they would have. Somehow I was not competent to deal with this new experience. I couldn't handle it.

During the weeks that followed my superiors put the emphasis on reducing our estimates of the enemy's personnel strength. By a process of rationalization I chose what seemed the only practical course. Without any good analytical reason, I sliced and cut away the strength figures in those categories where our intelligence was the least solid. These, of course, were the irregulars, the political cadres and the administrative services forces.

And as I waded deeper and deeper into this intellectual swamp, I found it necessary to rely more and more on rationalization for what I was doing. I told myself: "I am leaving here soon. These people are taking over. It is their war to fight. Maybe these higher figures are wrong. Whatever the case, it is their war and the consequences are theirs. Give them what they want, bless them and get your ass out of here."

Finally, in my last days at "Pentagon East," a final battle was fought over the estimate of enemy strength to be included in the new National Intelligence Estimate. Teams of officers from the Department of Defense, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the CIA and probably some other agencies gathered in Saigon to argue over what figure would be used. It was not intelligence at all. It was more like a labor negotiation. I worked smilingly to defend the MACV position, and I cut Sam Adams into bite-sized pieces.

If you saw the CBS documentary, Miss Mary, you may recall that Sam Adams said that I had told him privately that I did not believe the MACV strength figures in those categories which were the main issue of

dispute. And George Crile [the producer of the documentary, who did much of the interviewing for the program] had asked me, "How could you do that — tell Sam you agree with him privately and oppose him at the conference table?"

Intelligence analysts, Miss Mary, seem to inhabit dichotomous worlds. I discovered these worlds early in my career. One is the world of published conclusions — the command position, if you will. The other is that world where analysts grope with the fragile threads of evidence upon which they base their conclusions. It is too difficult for an analyst to weave these threads alone; he must share his burden, his faith and his doubts with fellow analysts. To achieve any satisfactory degree of mutual assistance, there must be a bond of mutual trust among the analysts. There must be an exchange of absolute intellectual truths.

So when external considerations influence the published conclusions, the integrity of the evidence itself is maintained among the analysts by a sharing of these intellectual truths. This is what Sam Adams and I were doing — sharing our private views even as we slugged it out toe to toe in the marketplace, or should we call it "the real world."

Eventually, one morning a colonel on the new intelligence staff at MACV handed me a slip of paper which he described as MACV's "final offer." It reflected the command's insistence that the new estimate not show any increase in enemy strength. I sallied forth to readjust our bottom line figure and defend it again. Soon thereafter it was announced that the MACV position had prevailed.

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My job was done. My tour was finished. I went to my hotel room, had a long bourbon, packed my gear and used my new rank of colonel to badger a Vietnamese dispatcher to send a military taxi from the MACV motorpool to take me to the Bien Hoa airbase. There, I sat on my gear apart from the others who were waiting for the great golden bird to take us all home.

Once home, I was to report in at Ft. Holabird for assignment to a nice, comfortable billet at the Army's Intelligence School. But the final weeks in Saigon were to haunt me. While visiting at the Defense Intelligence Agency for a short debriefing, a general officer on the DIA staff offered to have my assignment changed. He

would bring me to DIA where I could continue work on the order of battle problem.

This was a moment of supreme irony. How could I sit at a desk in the DIA and challenge the very figures I had helped invent at MACV? Or, how could I continue to defend intelligence estimates which I did not believe? Again, I was not up to it. I thanked the nice general but declined his offer.

Not longer afterward I saw Sam Adams again. Surprisingly, neither of us felt a residue of rancor from the bitterness of the debates in Saigon. I encouraged Sam to go on challenging the agreed — and incorrect — estimates, but to keep his battle within intelligence channels. ("It's bad business, Sam, airing an intelligence dispute outside the family.")

Retirement came and Sam visited me in Mississippi to probe for more information on what had gone on behind the curtains in Saigon. By now he had left the government, too, and was working on a book. I found it difficult to remember the details. I guess I didn't want to remember. The thing had become a blur. Sam's persistence aroused some antagonisms. He seemed to be challenging all of our order of battle intelligence techniques. Worse still, he seemed to suspect Gen. McChristian. This, to me, was only slightly less than sacrilegious. I became annoyed, and Sam's visit ended on a sour note.

Then came a bombshell. During the days of the Ellsberg/Russo trial in Los Angeles, I received a subpoena to testify in Los Angeles as a witness for the Ellsberg defense. The defense! I was dumbfounded.

I was also mad at Sam Adams, who seemed to be charging, in Ellsberg's and Russo's defense, that the entire gamut of MACV Intelligence had been corrupt; therefore, publication of the Pentagon Papers and the intelligence reflected therein could have caused no harm. I despised Ellsberg and his partner and considered the publication of the Pentagon Papers of enormous psychological benefit to the Vietnamese communists.

So, when two smiling agents of Army counterintelligence showed up on my front porch minutes after the departure of the gentleman who had

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delivered the subpoena, I was ripe for overreaction.

"No," I said, "there was no hanky panky [in the formulation of intelligence estimates] at all. None at all." I stuck by that position throughout two trips to Los Angeles before the trial collapsed under the weight of that psychiatrist's filing cabinet that President Nixon's boys had jimmed open. Never mind that I was committing — or at the very least, flirting with — perjury. Never mind how questionable my judgment was at the time. It just didn't seem fair that one seamy episode in an otherwise solidly successful intelligence effort should be cited in defense of an act which had caused irreparable harm to our own side. God, how I wanted us to "win" that war.

My friendship with Sam Adams was over. I would not see him again for several years. The war ended.

Then, early last year Sam called on the phone. His voice was cautious, as if he were throwing his hat through the door before entering. A CBS producer named George Crile was putting together a documentary on the intelligence problem in Vietnam. Would I talk to George Crile about the possibility of an interview?

"For God's sake, it's you again, Sam," was my first thought. I paused and looked around inside my mind, and I couldn't find any of the old inhibitions that had been there before. Surprisingly, the antagonism toward Sam Adams that I had nourished throughout the past several years had vanished. An after-action survey of the thing was long past due.

And perhaps, I'd retained a fragment of that old nag of intellectual morality which seemed to sneer: "You've used up your allotment of denials. Are you going to sit there and let that poor damned rooster crow himself to death before you decide to stand up and be counted?"

So I said, wearily, "Yes, Sam, I'll talk to George Crile." (And I thought to myself but did not say it aloud to Sam, "You persistent bastard. You never gave up, did you?")

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You asked, Miss Mary, about reactions to my participation in the making of the documentary. First, there was the call from Gen. Westmoreland on the day after the documentary was shown. The general obviously was upset over what he termed the damage to the integrity of the officer corps. I said little more than that I had not been quoted out of context.

Later, when the brief conversation was ended, I thought, starkly and bitterly, "Officer corps, my ass. What about the integrity of my profession? Military intelligence was the only true profession I have ever had, and when the crunch came, I had turned tail and run."

I have been asked questions about the existence of a "conspiracy" and about the impact of the *mis* or *un*-counting of the enemy's personnel strength on the outcome of the war. I do have opinions in each instance, but my opinions are no better than anyone else's, because my knowledge is no better than anyone else's.

However, I do know better than most that during the first 14 or so months of my tour of duty in Vietnam, order of battle intelligence estimates evolved after a study of the available intelligence; during the final four months, the conclusions came first. I know this better than most because I held the pencil in my hand and wrote the conclusions.

It has not been easy for me to violate the code of military disciplines which are so very vital to the successful conduct of military endeavor or to cry in the street about intelligence affairs. But somewhere along the line accommodation with the military disciplines and the code of silence about intelligence affairs ran head-on into the demand of intellectual integrity. That, purely and simply, is the "so what" of this tale.

You also asked about reaction to the documentary among the local populace. Truly, I had been a little apprehensive. This is not my birthing ground. I came here to retire 12 years ago, a total stranger. The people here accepted me as I came and asked few questions about my past. I had to wonder if they would put me down. And reactions did come in the weeks following the broadcast. Some said it might have been best to let the thing lie there under the log. Others have said, in effect, "I don't fault you; I'm glad you told us what you did; we had a large investment in Vietnam; we had a right to know."

The only truly unique statement was made to me at a West Point Rotary Club luncheon by a young accountant who purposefully shared a table with me several days after the broadcast. I say purposefully because it was obvious from the moment he bore down on me that he was bring-

ing a message. The message turned out to be flavored with the brash presumptuousness that so often characterizes today's young people. He said to me, "Colonel, I saw the TV show, and I want you to know that I like you a lot better now."

Well, so do I, Miss Mary, so do I.